

Investigating International Student Perspectives on Critical Thinking for UK Masters-level Study (0275)

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Critical thinking (CT) is typically a central component of higher education in Anglophone contexts (Barnett, 1997; van der Wal, 1999), with a particular focus on this skills at Masters-level. For example, in the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) at level 11 (Masters level), *critical* is the most frequent adjective, occurring seven times, and collocating with *understanding, knowledge, awareness, analysis, evaluation, and reflection* (<http://scqf.org.uk/the-framework/scqf-levels/>). This study focuses on the UK higher education context, where there is increasing internationalization, especially on postgraduate taught programmes; and more specifically it looks at the mismatch between the assumption that CT is a generic skill of postgraduate students and the reality of student cohorts with diverse educational and cultural backgrounds. Although international students are typically required to achieve specified academic and linguistic targets to enter academic programmes, there is no guarantee that these academic qualifications encompass skills of critical analysis and thinking. A key motivation for this study was the level of confusion and anxiety among Masters students observed in relation to academic expectations. Above all, students were unsure what CT means, as one student observed:

“...because everyone have [sic] their definition about critical thinking so I think because it’s different from person to person so it’s really hard for me to say ah I really understand what critical thinking is...”

It is also hardly surprising that students are confused when there is also a lack of consensus among academics on the precise nature of CT (Halonen, 1995; Moon, 2008; Moore, 2013). For example, Moore (2013) interviewed academics in different disciplines and identified seven different strands: (1) judgment; (2) scepticism; (3) simple originality; (4) sensitive readings; (5) rationality; (6) an activist engagement with knowledge; and (7) self-reflexivity. While previous research has focused on staff perceptions of CT, there is a need for more research investigating student perspectives.

The current study, which was part of a larger research project on generic research courses at a Russell Group university, aimed to investigate international students’ perceptions of CT, and also how their viewpoints changed over time. To this end, focus groups were conducted in February and July of the Masters year. 19 students (16 from China, 2 from Greece and one from Turkey) took part in the first set of three focus groups; and 8 of these students (5 from China, 2 from Greece and one from Turkey) returned in July for a second set of focus groups. In the initial focus groups, students were asked what they understood CT to be. While students identified 33 different features, only four were mentioned by more than two students: *multiple perspectives* (x 10); *weighing up pros and cons* (x 10); *NOT passive acceptance of ideas* (x 4); *arguments requiring supporting evidence* (x 4). A lack of consensus on the meaning of CT was therefore also apparent among the students. Here are some representative quotes:

- “... when someone says something or writes something you need to be critical ... and you can’t take it for granted that ok if he says so it’s true you have to find to search for what lies behind his views...” [GTP20]
- “I think critical thinking is important for us to know that there is no right or wrong answer just based on the perspective you choose...” [C2P9]
- “it’s important that you should offer reasons for the position you take” [C3P13]

The students were also presented with three statements about CT, which identified that:

- nearly all students agreed that, “Critical thinking is a key component for Masters level study.”;
- over 50% agreed that, “Critical thinking is a new approach to learning for me”;
- six participants agreed that, “Critical thinking makes me feel uncomfortable”.

The anxiety expressed in the third statement related predominantly to CT being expected in written assignments, as well as to discomfort with being in grey areas:

- “I am always uncertain about whether I was being critical or not in my assignment and it [sic] sometimes feel insecure.” [C2P8]
- “it is really difficult because there is not one truth there are many truths so I think it’s not the easiest thing to do...” [GTP20]

In the second set of focus groups, the participants were asked which of the identified features from the 1st focus groups they most and least associated with CT; and this was followed by discussion on trajectories in perceptions of CT during the Masters year. Although findings from the second set of focus groups were more limited by the reduction in participants, a general sense of increased positivity and confidence in relation to being critical could be observed. Some students also talked about finding their own voice.

A further reflection related to CT as a generic and transferable skill gained through postgraduate study:

- “...it’s just special skill I think it’s for example maybe when we graduate from here we will forget what we learnt in the specific courses ... but critical thinking is a skill that we can take away...” [C5P9]

In terms of pedagogy at Masters level, the key implications of these findings relate to the importance of making implicit expectations explicit, and thereby avoiding what Turner (2011, p.21) terms the “non-pedagogy, of osmosis”. It cannot simply be expected that students from a diverse range of social, cultural and educational backgrounds will pick up CT as they go along. An awareness of expectations related to CT needs to be built into the curriculum of content courses and/or courses need to be offered in which this skill is in itself taught and assessed for credit, alongside other components of academic literacies (Wingate, 2015). This approach can be expected to relieve students’ anxieties and accelerate processes of adaptation to Masters-level study.

This research was essentially exploratory, as it took place with a relatively small number of participants in one school. However, further empirical work can build on the conceptualizations of CT identified in this project to conduct larger scale empirical work across different subject disciplines, and with students from different linguistic and educational backgrounds.

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